



King's Research Portal

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Hamilton, C. F. (2018). Walter Benjamin's *Berliner Kindheit um 1900*: Longing, Enchantment and the Material Subject. *Life writing*, 15(3), 369-383.

Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact librarypure@kcl.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Walter Benjamin's *Berliner Kindheit um 1900*: Longing, Enchantment and the Material Subject

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to offer an interpretation of Walter Benjamin's *Berliner Kindheit um 1900* [*Berlin Childhood Around 1900*]. Exploring the style and the content of Benjamin's text, both of which portray the world of his childhood as a place of enchantment, I suggest that Benjamin creates in this text a conception of the self as displaced into the surrounding material world. I argue that, in doing this, Benjamin seeks to explore the materiality of the subject and erase its subjection to time, creating a self that is constituted only by space. I seek to show that this is part of Benjamin's strategy of exploring a decentered conception of agency. In all this, I suggest, Benjamin converts his own childhood into a work of art in which there is a longing for redemption that cannot finally be achieved but that expresses an important understanding of the truth of a human life.

Key words: enchantment; self; agency; materiality; art; redemption.

1. In what is probably the best known passage in his *On the Concept of History* Walter Benjamin speaks of 'the angel of history':

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awake the dead and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin 2007 [1955], 258)

This immensely tragic vision of history, belied by the intense and peculiar consolatory power of Benjamin's style of writing, is clearly intended to apply to human history as such. But it applies as well to the history of any given individual. Benjamin is acutely aware of the endless, unstoppable deterioration to which any given human life is exposed, which any given human life *is*, the way in which, as one looks back over one's life, one cannot but see a trail of destruction unmitigated by any good one might have been able to achieve or provide for others, as if one needed redemption not from this or that, but as such, as if one had committed some kind of error somewhere, one knows not what or where exactly, which one then spins out or unfurls in one's life, whether one wishes to or not. That, at any rate, is how Benjamin saw things and saw his own life, as Hannah Arendt (Benjamin 2007, 7)

points out. We live, he says elsewhere in his text on history, in an *Ausnahmezustand*, a state of emergency. He may have had in mind as he wrote this Baudelaire's vision of human life as a hospital in which we each mistakenly suppose we shall be better off by moving about, but remain in the hospital nonetheless, as if in an emergency ward where the doctors can do little for us but give us the illusion that they might cure us.

An angel is a figure of redemption - even if he fails to redeem. In this essay I wish to explore Benjamin's *Berliner Kindheit um 1900* (*Berlin Childhood Around 1900*),¹ his autobiography or memoir of his childhood, and offer an interpretation that situates Benjamin as one who is seeking redemption in or for, who is seeking to redeem, his life. Redemption would be, in this context, roughly, the achieved sense that some moment of life, some period of one's existence, had achieved a kind of plenitude that meant that, for its sake, all the errors and confusions of one's life, all the mistakes and the idiocies, all the pain inflicted and suffered, were worthwhile, had to be accepted for the sake of that redemptive moment.² In exploring this thought, I wish to do what I can to bring out what is so peculiar about this text, its dreamlike, hallucinatory, magical, incantatory quality, for this quality is central to the presentation of Benjamin's childhood as the redemptive moment in question. And this text is the product of a mind at once spiritual and yet deeply corporeal, like that of an angel and yet also like that of Virginia Woolf's Neville in *The Waves*, a 'mind like the tongue of an ant-eater, rapid, dextrous, glutinous'. In the memoir of his childhood *Abschied von den Eltern* (available in English as *Leavetaking*) - in many ways a reply, an act of homage to, and envious glance at, Benjamin's *Kindheit*³ - Peter Weiss (1974 [1964], 14) says that he had, as a child, 'a small toy truck filled with miniature boxes, and the thought of these boxes [now] evokes a thick, heavy feeling in the roof of my mouth'. That is just the sensation one has on reading Benjamin's text, and it is provoked in the same way in the confrontation, through memory, of present reflection and childhood experience: one's mouth feels clammy and full, as if one had a spoonful of syrup to swallow, and one's body feels heavy and warm, lethargic and indolent, as if the warmth of the summer sun were bearing down on one through the trees in the heat of the afternoon, the dappled light playing across one's skin. We are 'in the electric heat/Hypnotised': Benjamin's prose here has a hypnotic quality that can make one drowsy. It is this that is central to this text and there can be absolutely no doubt that this is the experience for which Benjamin was seeking in writing his memoir as he does. It is as if everything about him in his childhood evoked the feeling of heaviness and thickness in his mouth, and this sensation is what he wants the reader to experience.

2. Benjamin's *Kindheit* has a complicated history. It grew out of an earlier, abandoned work, *Berliner Chronik*, and was started around August 1932. But Benjamin wrote the introduction in 1938 after he had revised, and shortened, the main bulk of the text. Between 1932 and 1938, indeed, he produced at least four versions of the text. He failed in his efforts to get the work published as a book, although he did publish some parts of it in newspapers and in Thomas Mann's journal *Maß und Wert*. The first book version was published under the auspices of

Theodor Adorno in 1950. A later version in 1972 increased the length of the previous publication by adding material that Benjamin had conceived as part of the text but had been left out of the 1950 edition. But in 1982 the so-called 'final version', with an arrangement by Benjamin himself, was discovered in Paris. This was published in 1989 in Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften*, and for this essay I have used the version of this published in 2006 by Suhrkamp (Benjamin 2006a). This text also contains various fragments from earlier versions. The most readily available English edition that I have consulted (Benjamin 2006b) deviates from the Suhrkamp text in some respects in its arrangement. There is, in any case, no definitive version of the text.

Part of what makes the text so open to taking on various arrangements is the fact that it in no sense offers a more or less linear, narrative ordering or account of Benjamin's childhood. In the abandoned *Berliner Chronik*, he writes (Benjamin 2016, 23): 'Memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but its *theatre*'. The thought is not entirely clear but I take it that Benjamin is suggesting that there is no hope at all – as one might naïvely suppose – of unearthing the experienced personal past and relating it in any way that simply or straightforwardly represents it as it was, somehow pristine in the integrity of what it was at the time. Benjamin is surely right about that,⁴ and this accounts, at least in part, for the approach he adopts here.

He makes his method clear in a comment in the very first section, *Loggien*, 'Loggias' when, speaking of the air of the inner courtyards into which Berlin's loggias look, he says that this

air has forever remained intoxicating for me. I believe that a residue [*Beisatz*] of this air was present around the vineyards of Capri where I held my lover close to me; and it is just this air that envelopes the images and allegories that dominate my thinking as the caryatids on the heights of the loggias dominate the courtyards of Berlin's West End. (Benjamin 2006a, 11)

Past and present, adult longing and childhood memory, adult memory and childhood longing, the material and the spiritual (as all erotic love is), thinking and feeling, sentiment and reflection are fused here in a way that revels in the impossibility of full comprehension, philosophical dissection, analytic insight. Or again, writing of the winter mornings and characteristically projecting himself outwards into objects – 'the winter morning would entrust me to the safekeeping of the things in my room' (Benjamin 2006a, 29) – he says that the nursemaid, waking him at half past six in the morning, would place an apple in the stove by his bed. Opening the door of the stove to see the it slowly cooking, Benjamin tells us that the apple was on a 'journey through the dark land of the oven's heat from which it had wrought the fragrance of all the things that the day held in store for me' (Benjamin 2006a, 30).

And so it was not surprising that whenever I warmed my hands on its shining cheeks I was overcome by a hesitation preventing me from biting into it. I

sensed that the fugitive knowledge [*Kund*] that it brought in its smell could only too easily slip away from me on the way to my tongue. (Benjamin 2006a, 30)

Whatever else we say about this account of the winter morning, and however sensitive we imagine Benjamin as a boy to have been, there can be little doubt, I think, that we see here his conception of memory at work, since, at the very least, the intense specificity of the feelings Benjamin suggests the apple provoked in him is of a kind that can only come with adult knowledge, however powerful the sentiment in the child, and however precious he might be. I am not, of course, in any sense denying he loved the apple and all the associated feelings of the winter morning and the like. But it is the adult reconstructing the child's experience that we have here, not the attempt to get at what it was like for the child in a way that might respond to, or capture, the child's inchoate sense of things, which always resists the precision with which the adult seeks to articulate things.

Another, perhaps even more telling, example of the same inflection is to be found in the passage *Schmetterlingsjagd*, 'Butterfly Hunt'. 'The old law of hunters began to dominate us', he says, referring to his relationship with the butterfly of which he was in pursuit.

[T]he more I pressed myself close to the animal in all the fibres of my being [*ich selbst in allen Fibern mich dem Tier anschmiegte*], the more butterfly-like I became in my inner being, the more the butterfly took on, in all it did, the colours of human resolution, and finally it was as if capturing it was the price that had to be paid for my reconquering my human existence [*meines Menschendaseins wieder habhaft werden könne*]. (Benjamin 2006a, 20-1)

The particular quality of Benjamin's experience here becomes especially clear by comparing it with, say, Orwell's comment (Orwell, 1970 [1952], 18) about *his* boyhood trips to go butterfly hunting away from his detested boarding school:

And oh, the joy of those occasional expeditions! The ride of two or three miles on a lonely little branch line, the afternoon of charging to and fro with large green nets, the beauty of the enormous dragon flies which hovered over the tops of the grasses, the sinister killing-bottle with its sickly smell, and then tea in the parlour of a pub with large slices of pale-coloured cake!

One thing that make Orwell's prose so much more direct than Benjamin's is his use of exclamation marks to convey the thrill of it all; another is the simplicity of his writing, which gives his text a certain boyhood innocence that is utterly lacking in Benjamin's memoir. Benjamin's vocabulary and prose style – for example, his grammatical choices – gives his text a metaphysical flavour, as if each thing and event carried with it a metaphysical significance which, if one could only get it right, would allow one, as it were, to settle things once and for all, as if behind all appearance there lurked the thing-in-itself about which one could speak after all

and which would solve the enigma of human existence. In Orwell's hands (and mouth) cake is just cake; for Benjamin, cake would be, as was his apple, laden with a spiritual and metaphysical significance that only the adult mind could experience as Benjamin presents it.

3. Benjamin's text consists of a number of what he called *Denkbilder*, 'thought images' (or 'thought pictures'; 'thought figures'), isolated fragments, images that surged up for him in thinking about this childhood, and in which he appears as a protagonist only indirectly, and sometimes opaquely, since the main interest is in places and things, in particular moments or sensations, in specific locations or times. Indeed, Benjamin's strategy throughout is to plunge himself into the things around him and dissolve or dissipate himself into locations or sensations in the spirit of his comment that '[o]ne forms an image of a person and of his nature [*Wesensart*] from his place of residence and from the neighbourhood in which he lives...' (Benjamin 2006a, 43). He is explicit about this strategy:

Early on I learnt to clothe myself in words, which were actually clouds. The gift of recognizing similarities is really nothing but a weak residue of the old compulsion to become like others and behave in the same way. Words exercised this compulsion over me. Not those that made me resemble well-behaved children, but apartments, furniture, clothes. I was distorted [*entstellt*] by my similarity to all that surrounded me. (Benjamin 2006a, 59)

Or again, he tells us that when he went to his customary hiding places he would become one with the hiding place:

The child that stands behind the doorway becomes himself something white that flutters, a ghost. The dining table under which he has crawled turns him into the wooden idol of the temple, where the four carved legs are four pillars. And behind a door he is himself a door... (Benjamin 2006a, 61)

And the same move is repeated when Benjamin speaks of his love of the colours of the stained-glass windows of an old summerhouse in the garden: 'Whenever I passed from one pane to the other inside I was transformed: I took on the colours of the landscape' (Benjamin 2006a, 70).

The Benjamin we encounter in this text is one marvellously, mysteriously present because so displaced, displaced into the telephone installed in his parents' home, the zoo, the *Siegessäule* [Victory Column], the market... It is not simply, as Susan Sontag (Benjamin, 1979, 8) has it, that 'Benjamin projected himself, his temperament, into all his major subjects', since, though that is true, it fails to get at the intensely corporeal, bodily feel of this text, in writer and reader alike.

4. Benjamin tells us that he adopts the approach of displacement because he wanted to inoculate himself against his longing, 'to hold it in check through insight into the necessary social irretrievability of the past, not the contingently biographical'

(Benjamin 2006a, 9). But the book is full of longing and of the contingently biographical – although, as I have noted, not at all the biographical that the literal-minded might seek: ‘I did this, then that happened...’. That is one thing that makes it so worthwhile reading, since it is also and at the same time full of insight into the social and its loss, its irretrievability. Every object, place, person described here speaks of some longing, some personal yearning or nostalgia made all the more acute because the social conditions that made the object possible are being swept away as Benjamin writes in the 1930s. This longing makes of the text a dream, sensual and erotic. The thick, heavy feeling of the body is that of the erotic encounter, the body fulfilled, but, as in the deepest such encounters, left with a sense of something just out of reach, some moment of redemptive bliss that would put an end to any further erotic desire the body may contain. Desire can only be satisfied in its failure at being satisfied, at the moment when its redemption is frustrated. This comes out clearly in a passage entitled *Der Strumpf*, ‘The Sock’, where Benjamin writes of a cupboard in which, underneath piles of clothes, he would find his socks that were in a ‘traditional manner rolled up and turned inside out. Each pair had the appearance of a small pocket’.

Nothing exceeded the pleasure I had in sinking my hand as deeply as possible into its interior. I did this on account of its warmth. It was ‘what was proffered [*das Mitgebrachte*]’, rolled up inside, that I always held in my hand and that drew me into the depths. When I had encircled it with my fist and, so far as I could, come into possession of the soft, woollen mass, the second part of the game began: that of the unveiling. For now I set about unravelling ‘what was proffered’ from its woollen pocket. I pulled it ever closer to me until I fell into consternation: I had pulled out ‘what was proffered’, but ‘the pocket’ in which it had lain was no longer there. I could not get enough of testing this movement [*Vorgang*]. (Benjamin 2006a, 58)

The erotic charge – the *male* erotic charge - of this game is unmistakeable.⁵ Desire here is inflected as erotic desire that achieves its goal as a moment of consternation: the moment of orgasm is a moment of disappointment – not because it is never as good as it promises to be, but precisely because it is a moment of ecstasy. I think Benjamin is latching onto that dimension of human sexuality, of erotic love, in which its ecstasy is unbearable for human beings because, in its perfection, it lifts them beyond what they can bear in all their frailty and weakness and so takes them beyond their own condition. Hence the ancient thought that the true apotheosis of sexual love is to be found in death.

It is not just erotic desire that is represented here as fulfilled in its frustration. In the section on *Das Fieber*, ‘The Fever’, Benjamin writes of being often ill as a child and being confined to bed. He suggests that this explains his

tendency to see all that matters to me approach me from a distance as the hours approached my sickbed. Hence it is that I miss my greatest pleasure when travelling if I cannot wait for a long time for the train at the station; and

this is also why giving gifts has become a passion with me: for I, the giver, anticipate in advance the surprise of those who receive. Indeed, my need in waiting to anticipate that which comes to me - as a sick person is supported by the pillows that he has behind his back - had the result that, later on, women appeared all the more beautiful to me the longer and the more consolingly I had to wait for them. (Benjamin 2006a, 37-8)

This kind of thing is a pattern that repeats itself in the text: desire is satisfied when its fulfilment is withheld, when it is experienced as deferred or frustrated. This is Benjamin's strategy of 'inoculated longing': desire comes to terms with its own non-fulfilment and, in doing so, is left behind the subject, Benjamin no longer burdened. Yet the text as a whole, so full of longing, hardly convinces the reader that it has been inoculated.

5. The world Benjamin describes in his book is thoroughly enchanted: it is a world filled with magic. Everything is what it is in itself and something else, something of spiritual and metaphysical significance, and gods and goddesses inhabit this world: the city god of Berlin, who begins in the loggias: 'He remains so present there that nothing transitory can hold its own compared to him' (Benjamin 2006a, 13); the god of the *Markthalle*, the Market Hall, 'who himself threw their wares into their lap [that of 'the priestesses of the venal Ceres']: berries, shellfish, mushrooms, lumps of meat and cabbage...' (Benjamin 2006a, 36); and the cold goddesses of the swimming pool who jealously cut off the swimmers from the outer world (Benjamin 2006a, 57). But there is no structured cosmology here, as it were, an incipient theology, still less a cosmology that Benjamin shares with his peers, who are altogether less real in this text than the gods by which Benjamin takes himself to be confronted. Nor is there any obvious connection with Judaic cosmology. Benjamin's is a private vision even as it seeks to be, is, a vision of an historical epoch: here we have a subjectivity fully displayed, but mastered, claiming attention as more than a personal obsession precisely through the style it evinces. Thus, speaking of the loggias, Benjamin writes:

Since I was a child the loggias have changed less than other rooms. But that is not the only reason they are close to me. It is rather a matter of the consolation [*des Trostes wegen*] that lies in their uninhabitability for him who has no longer anywhere to live [*nicht mehr recht zum Wohnen kommt*]. They are the limit of the Berliner's abode. Berlin - the god of the city himself - begins in them...In his protection place and time come into their own and find each other. (Benjamin 2006a, 13)

Benjamin skirts his self-pity here, looking at it, as it were, out of the corner of his eye, in pursuit of consolation. The move is completed in the same gesture that masters his subjectivity: it is the move from *his* closeness to the loggias to what the *Berliner* experiences.

Benjamin is evasive too about this self-pity in the introductory comments, when, speaking of the images of his metropolitan childhood, he says this:

No traditional forms await them yet as do those - in accordance with a feeling for nature – that have been available for centuries for the memories of a childhood spent in the country... I hope that in them it is at least clear how much the person spoken of here later renounced the security that was the destiny of his childhood [*seiner Kindheit beschieden gewesen war*]. (Benjamin 2006a, 9-10)

It is, in fact, not at all obvious that Benjamin's hope is justified: anyone reading his memoir, and without other information about him, might be forgiven for having no idea that the security he had as a child was precisely what was lacking in his adult life, shambolic, awkward, self-destructive as it was, what with the failure of his *Habilitationsschrift*, his messy financial relationship with his father, his failed marriage, his dissociation of sensibility (his wife commented at one point that he was just 'brains and sex'⁶), his inability to finish projects or get them published as he wished when they were finished, and his suicide that, it seems, could easily have been avoided had he arrived at the Franco-Spanish border just one day later. As Hannah Arendt (Benjamin 2007, 6-10) points out, the 'bungler' is a key figure that haunts Benjamin.

Or perhaps he might. In a sense, it is just the oneiric, intoxicated quality of Benjamin's childhood as we find it here that will make one think that all is not as it seems. Where, for example, are the forms of boredom and frustration typical of moments of any childhood in Benjamin's account? Certainly the boy seems isolated, deeply turned in on himself. But there is no anger here, no rage, very little of the typical forms of stubbornness or demandingness characteristic of childhood. All is presented as if held fast at the bottom of a layer of amber through which it is seen, the colour lending to it a melancholy glow of life held fixed for inspection.

But this is just what Benjamin wants, a childhood in which there is no passage of time. Time here is converted into space. This is why there is no narrative. It is why, except in the most attenuated sense, nothing happens. The fragments of the text could be arranged in any order and it would make no difference. This is deepest reason why there is no final, definitive text: such a text could not exist except as a contingency of time that the text itself aims to show to be without application.

The spatial arrangement of his life serves a very specific purpose for Benjamin. For it is a way of marking the extraordinary openness that the world has for a child: in the child's experience of the world, anything might be possible because the world is *open*: from this moment in the child's life any number of possible tracks or paths lead outwards into any number of possible futures. The world is thus spatially arranged for the child. Time does not exist for him as something by which he is burdened or weighed down, however much any given moment might be filled with

the stagnation of time that is boredom.⁷ The spatiality of Benjamin's childhood is, as we shall see, central to the redemption it seeks.

Key to Benjamin's conversion of time into space is the materialism this text manifests. This materialism has little if anything to do with the kind that might be associated with Marxism - Benjamin had read little of Marx, anyway, and the effect on him of reading Marx, when he did, is unclear, as many commentators have noted. Rather, in expelling himself into the material world, he is in search of his own materiality, what D.H. Lawrence in a letter of 5th June 1914 to Edward Garnett (Lawrence 1997, 78) called '[t]hat which is physic – non-human, in humanity'. 'You mustn't look in my novel for the old stable *ego* – of character', Lawrence goes on.

There is another ego, according to whose action the individual is unrecognizable, and passes through, as it were, allotropic states which it needs a deeper sense than any we've been used to exercise to discover are states of the same radically unchanged element. (Like as diamond and coal are the same pure single element of carbon. The ordinary novel would trace the history of diamond – but I say, 'Diamond, what! This is carbon.' And my diamond might be coal or soot, and my theme is carbon.)

It is as if Benjamin wanted to discover his own being as carbon, as an element at one with the material world from which all is composed. The thought here is oddly close to that of a thinker in so many ways profoundly unlike Lawrence, namely, Rilke, who certainly had a direct influence on Benjamin. For 'materialism' here also means a deep spirituality, a desire, as Rilke has it, to make the material world invisible in us by means of investing ourselves in it, and it in us, in a way that expresses a sense of its magical, sacred quality. He explains this in a letter of 13th November 1925 to his Polish translator, Witold von Hulewicz (Rilke 1963 [1923], 129):

Even for our grandparents a 'House,' a 'Well' a familiar tower, their very dress, their cloak, was infinitely more, infinitely more intimate [than for us]: almost everything a vessel in which they found and stored humanity...[T]he house, the fruit, the grape [were things] into which the hope and meditation of our forefathers had entered . . . The animated, experienced things that SHARE OUR LIVES are coming to an end and cannot be replaced. WE ARE PERHAPS THE LAST TO HAVE STILL KNOWN SUCH THINGS . On us rests the responsibility of preserving, not merely their memory (that would be little and unreliable), but their human and laral worth. ('Laral' in the sense of household-gods.)

In this text of Benjamin's a search for the materiality of the self is of a piece with a search for the spirituality of things, where the barriers between human being and world, the spiritual (or metaphysical) and the material, are broken down in a sacralising move that expresses a sense of the indissoluble unity of things.

6. But there is a further reason for Benjamin's projection of himself outwards into material things, events, situations, in his effacing of his own presence in the peculiar

way he carries this out. For throughout *Kindheit* Benjamin shows himself acutely aware of what one might call a decentered or displaced conception of agency. He wishes to grasp the self as something outside itself, as a point at which social, political, cultural, religious traditions come together and meet in a given individual. This is a perspective on the self that we find almost impossible to take up in ordinary life. From the inside, the forces that act on me and make me a product of a specific kind of world are largely invisible to me, or can be seen, as it were, only sideways on. One of the most striking facts about any human life are the contingencies of politics, tradition and the like that make it what it is. These run through it and are expressed by it, yet one's understanding of these things is highly elusive. What Benjamin is seeking to do is to *locate himself out there*, show himself, his agency, his identity as the product of the peculiar circumstances of his life at this time and place. He is, as it were, trying to catch the self as it evaporates in its realisation in *this* social and cultural world. This is a central reason why the text so incessantly deflects knowledge of the self whilst insisting on it so forcefully: Benjamin, this individual, is most emphatically, unmistakeably present, and yet, at the same time, and through the same gesture, absent, dissolved in the *Umwelt* in which he exists. This, I think, is one of the most powerful things about this text, making it so seductive: one has the constant sense of lagging behind Benjamin, as if on the next page he will say something that reveals who he is and satisfy one's curiosity. But the moment never comes, and one has the sense that, had he written a book of a thousand pages on his childhood, one would be none the wiser.

Benjamin's strategy here, then, expresses a particular philosophical conception of the self. But it also expresses certain personal concerns. Central amongst these is, indeed, something that is a product of the particular high bourgeois world from which he came – a world from which he sought to liberate himself but, as he makes clear, could not: he describes the idea of repudiating the class from which he came as 'illusory' (Benjamin 2006a, 93). For central to that world was unquestionably a stiffness and formality which many now would find stifling – and which he found stifling. But he also felt the warmth and security it provided, as he makes abundantly clear. This stiffness thus becomes one of the central motivations of the text, animating it with a fear of a being known, of revealing too much, even as the whole point of Benjamin's text is to reveal the self. That is, Benjamin shows himself here full of fear and desire: the fear of revealing himself, of handing himself over to the reader, together with a desire to do so. Or, to put the point somewhat differently: Benjamin's text, in its metaphysical and spiritual ambitions, in its incredible *formality* of style, expresses the stiffness of the bourgeois world from which he came and which he needed, as much as he loathed it, to write this very text: bent back upon itself, Benjamin's memoir rejects that from which it feeds.

7. Benjamin's text is multiply layered and evasive, circling around a space that the reader will often suspect to be empty and yet seems so full, such is the density of the work and the sense of body it conveys. Right from the outset the book announces itself as an exploration of Benjamin's childhood, but the childhood is endlessly and explicitly saturated in the adult Benjamin's thinking and longing; the self is

projected outwards into things and events, and these things are projected back into the self, and thus asks to be known and resists such knowledge; desire is satisfied in its frustration; the time-bound, limited creature is rejected in favour of a spatialised subject that itself evaporates. And throughout this there is a sense of an enchanted place, thick and heavy with the body and the world of existing things, each such thing through and through material and yet metaphysically significant.

This is highly significant. If, as I have suggested, there is a strategy of redemption in Benjamin's text, then it is clear that this is a kind of redemption that cannot be fulfilled: the whole text speaks of a search for it that fails. I do not think that this is incidental to Benjamin's purpose. On the contrary, it is just what he wants. This is because the overall project that Benjamin has in this text is to write his own childhood as a work of art. And the text inherits aesthetic strategies of modernism and Romanticism in doing so. I can begin to explain what I mean by adverting for a moment to a defining statement of such an aesthetic, Joseph Conrad's famous preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (Conrad, 1897).

One would like to quote the whole of Conrad's text, so rich and important is just about everything said in it. But here is what might be taken to be its central idea:

[A]rt itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect. It is an attempt to find in its forms, in its colours, in its light, in its shadows, in the aspects of matter and in the facts of life, what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential — their one illuminating and convincing quality — the very truth of their existence...[T]he artist descends within himself, and in that lonely region of stress and strife... appeals to that part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom: to that in us which is a gift and not an acquisition — and, therefore, more permanently enduring. He speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation — and to the subtle but invincible, conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts: to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity — the dead to the living and the living to the unborn.

For many, of course, in the contemporary world, this kind of statement will appear to be little more than the discredited manifesto of one who has been overtaken by modernity's destruction of the idea that art has anything much to say that is not the product of class prejudice, vested interests and religious sentiment seeking a last refuge in art when it has been vanquished on its own territory. But the fact remains that it does a great deal to capture for many a sense of why art matters. More importantly, I suggest, it does so in the case of Benjamin. Benjamin, descending within himself, seeks to render justice to the visible universe and, in doing so, to find

the truth of each thing: this is his strategy of self-displacement into things that remains faithful to them as they are and yet sees in them a significance of metaphysical and spiritual import that reveals their truth, their truth not simply as the things of his life, or in his life, but also their truth as such, behind their manifest appearances. Consider one further example, to add to those I have already cited, the telephone, a new arrival in the home:

Every day and hour the telephone was my twin brother. I was able to observe how it left behind the humiliations of its first years. For, when the chandelier, fire screen, indoor palm, console table, *guéridon* and alcove balustrade, which were at that time all on display in the front rooms, were long ruined and moribund, the telephone, like a legendary hero who had been exposed to die in a mountain gulley, leaving the dark corridor behind, made its majestic entry into the light and bright rooms, now occupied by the younger generation. To them, it was a consolation for their loneliness. To those without hope, who wanted to leave this wicked world, it winked with the light of a last hope. With the forsaken, it shared a bed. (Benjamin 2006a, 18)

More than our seeing simply an account of what the telephone meant to different people, we sense here its mythology, a persistent attempt to penetrate it for what it truly is, its deepest meaning. And, in the appeal to loneliness, hopelessness, forsakenness we see that appeal to the conviction of solidarity amongst human beings, to fellowship. The acute tones of pain and joy are here captured.

8. Benjamin's text of his childhood as a work of art, its multi-layered evasiveness, and its attempt to penetrate appearances to get at their meaning, at what 'is fundamental, what is enduring and essential [in them] — their one illuminating and convincing quality — the very truth of their existence', are mutually supportive strategies. For what Conrad suggests in his preface is that art has a special place in revealing the truth of human existence. This is clearly what Conrad means in speaking of 'art...as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect'.

Now, as Sebastian Gardner (2014, 245-48) has pointed out very forcefully, *how* art does this and *what* exactly it reveals remains resistant to complete articulation or comprehension. Many artists and philosophers have, of course, sought to capture the experience we have when confronted by a work of art that seems to offer just the kind of illumination of which Conrad speaks. But *what* is revealed by such a work of art remains opaque to full comprehension even if the experience in question demands recognition in its own terms. Further, the peculiar arrangement of the work of art – its specific relation of form and content, for example - that seems to offer such understanding as is in question is clearly central to *how* a work of art reveals what it reveals, but, once again, we do not fully understand or grasp how that is so: pretty much most of what we say about the relation of form and content in a work of art strikes us as banal, as failing to capture the experience that

motivates such speech. Works of art always return us to themselves as we are struck by a need to go back to them again and again, as if we hoped or supposed that one more viewing or reading or listening might enable us to grasp in discursive terms, finally, just what it is that the work reveals and how it does this. This is the characteristic *hunger* that one can have for given works of art.

Now, if Benjamin's *Kindheit* is a work of art, as I am suggesting it is, we have a better understanding of its evasiveness. For Benjamin's strategy here is consonant with that which is typical of works of modernism where there is a relentless search not only to reveal the truth of things, but also, and at the same time, to subject to interrogation the elusiveness of our understanding of both *what* that truth is that might be revealed and *how* it is that a work of art can reveal it. In other words, typical modernist works of art explore their own condition even as, and because they, explore the world: this is their characteristic self-consciousness.⁸ Benjamin's account of his childhood thus locates itself in the modernism of literary works of art. Its being an autobiography of a childhood and its refusal of this condition; its account of desire as fulfilled in its frustration; its spatialisation of the subject in its projection into the material world: these all are key to its struggle to locate the truth of the world, its inability to do this *and* its knowledge that this is its condition. And central to this is its outstanding feature as a work of art, namely, that intoxicated, dream-like, magical experience it expresses and evokes in the reader.

The redemption that is sought in this text is thus forever elusive. But this is not a failure of the text, as if Benjamin might have secured the redemption he sought if only he had got things right. On the contrary, Benjamin's strategy has an important implication for the truth of a life, as it has, as we have seen, for the truth of the world. It is as if he were saying to us: the truth of a life is always just out of reach, exists just there, over the horizon of all the individual events and moments of the life. Final redemption would be to grasp that truth, but the failure to do so is not some limitation on any given individual person, some error from which someone or other might be free or liberated. It is, rather, a condition of living a human life, a necessary limitation on such existence. To live a human life is always to have a sense that there is some truth about that life, but one can neither reach it nor give up the attempt to do so.

What does truth mean here? Central here is, I think, as Pascal explored so magnificently, the notion of *distraction*. We all spend our lives in a relentless quest to service the demands of the self, to provide what we suppose ourselves to need, to shore up the flagging ego through strategies of vanity or greed that we dignify as justified self-concern. Yet there can be moments in which all that falls away and we see ourselves for what we are and can suppose, perhaps, that we could live in the light of that. But we cannot for, were we *per impossibile* to do so, we could no longer exist, for the world is such that this stillness and self-knowledge is unliveable: we could no longer, so to speak, fend for ourselves were we to try to live in this way.

All this is said better by Pascal than I can say it. But an example may help. It concerns the reaction of a friend of mine to the film *The English Surgeon*, a documentary about the brain surgeon Henry Marsh who travelled regularly to the Ukraine where he sought to help an endless stream of patients suffering from brain tumours and the like, and who, without him, would have had little if any access to the kind of healthcare that many of us, lucky enough to live in other parts of the world, take for granted. The suffering by which Marsh was confronted, and its hopelessness at that time and place, would cause a scandal in, say, the UK, where, for all the failures that are inevitable in the system of healthcare, we can take it that such suffering will be attended to – whereas in the Ukraine, as depicted in this film, the radical maiming of human lives is accepted with a resignation that locates it as simply the luck of the draw in which there are bound to be losers. This thought is alien to the whole premise of the UK system of healthcare. My friend said that watching this film should change one's life. But it would not. He meant that the film *places* our egoism, our banality and triviality, our caring about things that do not matter, and we know do not matter. For sure, we can grow to be less prey to such things, but we cannot live without them, because the endless push of the world on us makes this impossible: we have to push back to survive and 'get on', and forms of banality, stupidity and triviality are inevitable in this. Yet the truth of a life would be that which we see when we see beyond all that - and to live in its light. Or, more exactly, the truth would be what we see of our own individual forms of banality in the light of that truth. But we cannot live accordingly, because we must assume what Virginia Woolf calls 'the burden of individual life': the truth of a life is beyond that burden in its perfect emptiness, freed from that burden, together with what that emptiness shows up about *my* life.⁹

We could put things this way. Any given life, I said, is, at its outset, an experience of the spatial openness of the world. Time does not yet exist for the child as something with which he is burdened and the world exists before him as a scene of possibilities that lead out from childhood into later life. As we grow older, we exchange space for time, become filled with time and lose the world as a theatre of space. Though from a natural scientific point of view it is true that we live in space and time equally so from the moment of birth until death, from a phenomenological point of view this is not so: we live, rather, in space and come to live less there and more in time. This is one reason for the poignancy and innocence of children: they are innocent since they are still only in space, barely entered upon time, and thus unburdened as the adult must be. That space is emptiness: the burden of individual life is the burden of time and its demands on us as we grow.

9. Benjamin, we can say, offers us a distinctly post-humanist ethic. This is precisely because his conception of the subject is one that is profoundly elusive to itself and is continuous with a world both material and spiritual. There is no conception here of the subject as an autonomous, self-knowing locus of agency, in control of itself and its environment. Contingency is central here. Childhood offers Benjamin the perfect vehicle for this ethic precisely because the child is so deeply absorbed in his world, in the world, as I have sought to bring out. Underlying Benjamin's approach is the

thought that, as adults, we live in a kind of fantasy in which we have become masters of our own lives, however much we know, somewhere, somehow, that this is, indeed, an illusion. We are material through and through, possessed of a sacred materiality that is characteristic too of the world that surrounds us, the world of the things, plants and animals. It is the way in which this unity is evoked in Benjamin's text that gives it its acute beauty, makes it revelatory of our lives as only a work of art can be. There is a kind of tragic affirmation in Benjamin's outlook, the tragedy coming from a sense of our own extraordinary frailty as part of the material world, the affirmation from the possibility that this opens up a particular kind of love of things in our closeness to them. And yet even here our absorption in the world is fractured, as is evidenced by the evasiveness of Benjamin's text. It is as if he wanted to say: we are at one with the world, but we cannot fully live this and cannot fully believe this. The tragic love of the world that Benjamin's text intimates and for which he searches, which he wants, finally eludes him. Even childhood, for Benjamin, is lived in a state of emergency.

References

- Améry, Jean 1994 [1968]. *On Ageing*. Translated by J.D. Barlow. Bloomington Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Benjamin, Walter 1979 [1928] *One-Way Street and Other Writings*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter. London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Benjamin, Walter 2006a [1987]. *Berliner Kindheit um 1900*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Benjamin, Walter 2006b. *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*. Translated by Howard Eiland. Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Benjamin, Walter 2007 [1955]. *Illuminations*. Translated by Harry Zohn. Edited and introduced by Hannah Arendt. Preface by Leon Wieseltier.
- Benjamin, Walter 2016 [1932]. *Berliner Chronik*, edited by Karl-Maria Guth. Berlin: Contumax.
- Conrad, Joseph 1897, preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*.
<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/c/conrad/joseph/c75nn/preface.html>, last accessed 3 December 2017.
- Finkelde, Dominik 2009 'The Presence of the Baroque'. In *A Companion to the Works of Walter Benjamin*, edited by Rolf J. Goebel, 46-69. Woodbridge/Rochester: Camden House.
- Friedlander, Eli 2012. *Walter Benjamin: a Philosophical Portrait*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Gardner, Sebastian 2014. 'Method and Metaphysics in the Philosophy of Art'. In *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics*, LI/VII, No. 2, 230–53
- Hamilton, Christopher 2009. *Middle Age*. Acumen: Stocksfield.
- Hamilton, Christopher 2018 (forthcoming). "No one is the author of his life": Philosophy, Biography and Autobiography'. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Philosophy and Literature*, edited by Michael Mack and Barry Stocker. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Josipovici, Gabriel, 2011. *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Lawrence, D.H. 1997. *The Selected Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, complied and edited by James T. Boulton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Orwell, George 1970 [1952] 'Such, Such Were the Joys'. In *A Collection of Essays*. New York: Harcourt, 1-47

Rilke, Rainer Maria 1963 [1923]. *Duino Elegies*, translated with a commentary and introduction by J.B. Leishman and Stephen Spender.

Ross, Alex 2017. 'The Naysayers: Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and the critique of pop culture' *The New Yorker*, September 15, 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/09/15/naysayers>, last accessed 3 December 2017.

¹ All translations from this text into English in this paper are mine.

² I take it that this idea is close to Nietzsche's idea of the affirmation of life in the willing of the eternal return of the same

³ In his 'The Presence of the Baroque', Dominik Finkelde (2009, 69) remarks: 'Curiously, Benjamin left no imprint on the works of West German author Peter Weiss, as might have been expected.' I do not know what the historical evidence for this claim is, but it seems implausible to me.

⁴ I have explored this further in Hamilton 2018 (forthcoming).

⁵ Cf. Eli Friedlander 2012, 110.

⁶ Quoted in Alex Ross 2017.

⁷ cf. Jean Améry 1994 [1968], 14-15.

⁸ For an excellent study of modernism, see Gabriel Josipovici 2011.

⁹ Is this (part of) what the Buddhists mean when they say there is no self? I suspect it is.